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C O N F I D E N T I A L AMMAN 002414

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA AND NEA/IPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/18/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [JO](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: IN REVERSAL, JORDAN SET TO RELEASE "QAFQAF4 FOUR"
EARLY

REF: A. AMMAN 2292

[B](#). AMMAN 2371

[C](#). AMMAN 2354

[D](#). AMMAN 2381

[E](#). 2007 AMMAN 2955

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) Summary: The Jordanian government appears set to release soon the four prisoners whom Israel turned over to Jordan in July 2007. The government justifies the move - which on the surface seems to contradict a bilateral Israeli-Jordanian understanding that they were to remain in jail for 18 months - by pointing to a Jordanian law that discounts jail time for good behavior, by which nine months count as a year. The move follows several weeks of protests and media commentary, and reflects an evolution of a GOJ position that initially rejected demands that the four be released from Qafqafa Prison (Ref A). While a contact at the Israeli Embassy in Amman says his country is unlikely to make a public stink at this time, he concluded that the GOJ action could affect future negotiations for the transfer of other Jordanians held by Israel. End Summary.

Jordan Reverses Itself

[2](#). (U) Until a Public Security Directorate (PSD) spokesman announced on August 15 that the "Qafqafa Four" would be freed on August 20, the government had denied any plan to release the prisoners before the end of their 18-month terms. Foreign Minister Salah Al-Bashir and others cited a desire not to harm efforts to get Israel to release other Jordanians in its custody. However, the press did report claims from Islamist MP Hamza Mansour that Prime Minister Nader Dahabi pledged at a early August dinner gathering that the four prisoners would be freed later in the month, based on Jordanian law that reduces sentences by a quarter if prisoners exhibit good behavior.

[3](#). (C) Jamal Al-Shamayleh, Director of Foreign Minister Salah Al-Bashir's private office, told PolCouns August 18 that, to his knowledge, there was not yet a formal GOJ decision to release the four. Nonetheless, referencing the PSD announcement, he said that it appeared likely that they would be released. While asserting that he personally saw the four as criminals, Shamayleh stressed the one-year-equals-nine-months explanation, by which the 18-month sentence would be reduced to 13-and-a-half. He said that Jordan's Ambassador in Tel Aviv had recently apprised Israeli FM Livni of GOJ intentions and that the Israelis, while not pleased, would not object strongly. Note: The

prisoners were transferred to Jordan on July 5, 2007. Thus, by Shamayleh's math, their reduced sentence of 13 1/2 months would end on or about August 19. End note.

14. (SBU) Embassy contact and regular columnist for the independent daily Al-Ghad, Muhammad Abu Rumman, wrote on August 16 that this decision is best viewed in "context of the official wariness of the danger of the current stage." This abstruse comment referred to the idea that the government is tweaking its foreign and domestic policy to better address today's realities. The government, he said, "is working to bridge the gap between the citizen and the state... and they contribute toward reducing the breakdowns from the political frustration and obstruction." Abu Rumman placed the prisoner release alongside news of renewed contacts with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood (septel) in Jordan, as well as the openings with Iraq (Refs B-D).

Israeli Embassy Resigned, But Disappointed

15. (C) Israeli Political Counselor Itai Bardov informed PolOff on August 18 that his Embassy had been given advance notice of the GOJ's intent to free the four - before last Thursday's announcement - and, while Israel objected to their early release, "we are not going to make a crisis over it." Bardov said he understood the public pressure on the GOJ, but found the justification decidedly post hoc: in arguing that under Jordanian law a month of prison time was only "21 or 22 days," said Bardov, the GOJ "came up with something" that had never been mentioned when the original understandings were reached last year.

16. (C) In response to a question as to whether GOI release of Palestinian prisoners to PA President Mahmoud Abbas, as is being anticipated in the press, would have triggered Israeli-Jordanian understandings that allowed for the release of the four (Ref A), Bardov replied that the agreement only permitted such a release, but did not require it. Moreover, he asserted, the GOJ release plan preceded the Israeli decision on the Palestinian prisoners. Bardov postulated that Jordan could have asked to link the four to the pending Israeli release if they had waited. He denied that there were ongoing talks on other prisoners that might be harmed by the GOJ action, but added, "this is food for thought," speculating that Israel is likely to be much more cautious in making similar deals based on Jordan's handling of the issue.

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